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Published on Wednesday, March 21, 2007.

Last modified on 3/20/2007 at 11:57 pm

Gazette Opinion: Park bison dispute migrates to Congress

Migration of Yellowstone bison and federal rules on bovine health were the focus of a U.S. House subcommittee hearing Tuesday in Washington, D.C. The hearing plowed the same ground the bison debate has occupied for too many years.

On Aug. 31, 1999, U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, Montana Gov. Marc Racicot, U.S. Sen. Max Baucus and representatives of the Church Universal and Triumphant were among 250 people attending a ceremony at Corwin Springs to herald the preservation of thousands of acres of land just outside Yellowstone's northern boundary. U.S. taxpayers purchased about 8,000 acres from the church for \$13 million.

"This valley is to be available for bison," Babbitt said that day. "We need to reach an agreement about a common management plan."

Stuck on step 1

The bison management plan remains in "step 1" because cattle from the church's Royal Teton Ranch still graze near the park's north boundary in winter, Robin Nazzaro, of the General Accountability Office said. When the money was spent, the participating federal and state agencies expected to obtain grazing rights by the winter of 2002-03.

"The value of this acquisition for the bison herd is minimal" without the winter grazing rights, Nazzaro testified.

Testimony at the hearing indicated that the federal government spent at least \$2.4 million in the winter of 2005-06 on monitoring, hazing and slaughtering Yellowstone bison to keep them away from cattle.

Schweitzer's suggestions

Give Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer credit for at least trying to move the issue toward resolution. He has been talking to ranchers and had the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks start negotiations with the church on winter grazing rights. At the House hearing Tuesday, Schweitzer offered some possible solutions to the subcommittee:

- Buy out rights to graze cattle in areas north and west of the park boundary.
- Create a buffer zone around the park where all cattle entering and leaving would have to

be tested for brucellosis and the U.S. Animal Plant Health Inspection Service would agree that if cattle in the buffer zone tested positive for the disease, that wouldn't affect the brucellosis-free status of the 2.5 million Montana cattle outside the zone. A year ago, the Western States Livestock Association called for such a quarantine area.

- Actively manage bison in the park to eradicate brucellosis. (Because there is no effective brucellosis vaccine for bison, eradication of the disease could mean eradication of the bison.)

John Clifford, deputy administrator of the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, made it clear that the agency isn't in favor of considering brucellosis risk in the immediate Yellowstone Park separately from the rest of Montana. Clifford said he saw "no point to changing the program" that has achieved brucellosis-free status in every state except Idaho and Texas. (Wyoming lost its status and regained it in recent years.)

Clifford said APHIS "will soon send a letter" asking agreement of all partner agencies in a long-term bison management plan. That's what the public thought had been written six years ago.

Protecting cattle, bison

The number of cattle grazing in the bison zone doesn't justify the annual public expenditure being made to separate these two species. By Schweitzer's estimate, there are about 700 head of cattle in the areas west and north of the park, but fewer than 200 are there in the winter. Those are on the Royal Teton Ranch near Gardiner. Giving bison more room to roam would also allow Montana to improve the bison hunt it has offered for the past two seasons.

Cattle producers all over Montana deserve to know that their businesses won't be threatened by something that happens on the edge of Yellowstone Park. Taxpayers deserve to get more for their millions than they've been getting. The unfinished plan leaves both the bison and the cattle producers at risk.

Members of the subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands are commended for shining a light on the unresolved bison issues. Montana's congressional delegation should start asking hard questions, too. As Schweitzer said in written testimony to the subcommittee: "Sustainable solutions are long overdue."